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Cultural Emotions

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Emotional Zone Paper

I have always been described by one distinct word: *shy*. This has followed me my entire life and is a characteristic that I project, and until recently only internalized negatively. Two years ago I began to stop focusing on my shyness after I realized that I was okay after all. Shyness is an emotion; something that most people go through at least once in their life. After accepting this as my nature, I understood that it was okay to feel shy—as long it didn't get in the way of what I wanted to do and learn. This realization helped me change my perception, and led me to take the initiative I needed to start the career I chose for myself as an Art History major. I then began to grow into myself.

After struggling at my first job interview that required an “outgoing” personality, I looked at the skills I did develop by being a quiet person. After practicing how to present yourself, to communicate even with a quiet personality, I was soon hired to work in a museum—and by summer I was accepted for an Getty internship at the same museum. Even though things have gone well so far and I've met some interesting people who have been very helpful in guiding me towards my career goals; I know I still have a long way to go. More so because I've started to examine how my culture sometimes

reinforces shyness in females. Shyness is not just a personality trait, but can also be impacted by how you are raised.

I am a second generation Chinese American. And sometimes it can be conflicting to live in a society that values independence, assertiveness and female empowerment—while being raised by traditional Chinese parents where autonomy isn't seen as very valuable. Second-generation children are often told by their parents that if they decide to move back home, they don't need to cook for themselves or pay rent. Basically, the parents are stating that someone will take care of you, and you don't have to worry about it. This kind of mentality probably stems from the tradition that children do not move out of the house until married, and an attempt to keep the family unit together. However, I always thought being sheltered this way could handicap me if I chose to continuously receive that treatment, especially since I am shy.

A few weeks ago, I ran into a situation where I was taken aback a bit. One weekend working at the Chinese American Museum, a Chinese family came in. At first the father asked me about some of the artifacts in one of our exhibits and I explained the meaning of the artifacts as I identified them. It seemed like he was helping his daughter by asking the questions; she had a spiral notebook and had taken notes on the exhibits. On their way out of the museum, the father asked me about jobs or volunteer work available; all while the daughter was standing right next to him. As her father was talking to me about work for his daughter, she never said a word, and it was a bit frustrating that I could not understand his questions since he did not speak English well. It took me a while to find out exactly what he was asking and it would have made such a big difference if she took the initiative to interpret what her father was trying to ask. It would

have also made a better impression if she were looking for a job, since it would have shown that she was able to take control of a situation and that she was not dependant on her parents. Watching her hide behind her father I began to think, “this isn’t good.”

Then at that moment I saw my former self in her — the way I was not too long ago. Seeing her expanded my fact field and I recognized what I could have been if I was completely obedient to my parent’s wishes, and didn’t try to break out of this combination of shyness and cultural influence. At that moment a wave of empathy for the girl swept over me since I understood the situation she was in. My parents used to do the same thing to me when I was younger. My mother would insist on trying to find a job for me and drive me to the place, come in with me, and talk to someone about filling out an application. I always knew this wasn’t a good approach, and I probably would not get the job, but I felt powerless. In Chinese tradition, you should respect your parents. If I spoke against my mother or declined her help, it usually resulted in her getting upset and stating the question “Do you think you know more than I do”? I would then at that moment be considered a bad daughter for disrespecting my mother, by not doing what she believed was best for me . This lack of emphasis of autonomy did not help me overcome my shyness.

I don’t know if the girl’s father would have been as dramatic as my mother was with me, but I knew how bad this looked. I answered the father’s question the best I could, and gave them our Museum Educators business card in case she decided she wanted to volunteer as a docent at our museum. And I told them that they could always look for volunteer jobs on other museums websites and museums are always happy to receive volunteers. After they left I formed new practices on how I could improve the

information I give out, in case this situation happened again. I also learned how important it is to contribute in a group situation if someone is talking on the behalf of me. The slightest effort can make the biggest difference, just to acknowledge that I am there with them.

If I was a person from a different culture, I might have just answered the question with some kind of judgment behind it. People may have judged her as being passive or inadequate for having her father speak for her. I might have also directly recommend that next time the daughter be prepared to ask the questions he had. However, in understanding the culture, I know that this would be intrusive and a bit disrespectful by directly tell the father what he should be doing for his daughter. I knew that this was actually a delicate situation. Most people might not have thought of this, but how I responded to the family would have had an impact on the father and daughters' relationship with each other at that moment. If I responded negatively and the girl may have recognized that, she may have felt embarrassed and resented her father for his initiative on her behalf. This is why I didn't tell the family what to do; rather I gave them information that the girl could use on her own. If she really wanted to volunteer at our museum, she would have to call the Museum Educator.

I have always been considered shy, and the way I was raised reinforced that, because my parent's culture did not recognize the expectations of this culture with its emphasis of the individual especially as a young adult. Seeing the shyness in that girl gave me a push to understanding myself more, and how much culture can influence an emotional personality.